The New HSC ... AGAIN!

The HSC has commenced and predictably there has been a call once again for changes to be made. This time it is not that it should be ‘on-line’; something suggested more than half a dozen years ago but that it solely focuses on memorisation.

Recently, Mohan Dhal, a textbook author, experienced teacher and representative of the Australian Tutoring Association, criticised the HSC as predictable and is pushing for ‘open book’ examinations as part of a radical overhaul. Students, according to Dhal, are simply regurgitating answers and this is not a proper preparation for the real world. The new focus should be on critical and creative thinking and would lead to a redesign of the examination. Chris Presland from the NSW Secondary Principals’ Council supports Dhal if questions are changed to promote problem-solving.

This sounds an interesting proposal. For many parents, this would be very different to their experiences. Open book examinations can be similar to traditional examinations but the major difference is that in open book examinations, students are allowed to bring their textbooks, notes or other reference materials into the examination situation. Here at All Saints’ we do use research notes and resources for some assessable tasks in Years 11 and 12.

At first glance this may seem like an easier type of examination for students, but they are designed to carefully test a student’s ability to apply their knowledge in a practical way. This is advantageous for most students because it takes away the worry about memorisation and instead allows them to focus on demonstrating their engagement with the course. This style provides a chance for students to acquire the knowledge during the preparation process of gathering suitable learning materials rather than simply recalling or rewriting it. However, much of a student’s success can depend on the accuracy of their notes, or their ability to read the course text quickly.

I can forecast some issues with this approach. Some students may spend too much time on finding out which parts of the books to look for answers instead of applying the knowledge, practical skills and reasoning ability. Also, students are unfamiliar with open-book examinations. They must be provided with clear procedures and rules. Practically, more desk space is needed for students during the examination because students must have room for their textbooks, notes and other reference materials. How does one feel about their surgeon who turns the pages of the book while performing surgery on his patients?

Nevertheless, it is important that we question what we do. We should be looking at what can be improved (if necessary). I note that a spokeswoman for the Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards has stated that there are no plans to implement open book examinations for HSC students… (at this stage).